

## CHAPTER LXXII

### THE RUINS OF CH'IAO-TZŪ

NEXT morning we were up long before the sun rose, and were just preparing to start on a fresh search for the missing baggage when reassuring proof came of its presence at no great distance. It was brought by a pony belonging to the cart which had been requisitioned to An-hsi from this very farm. The men at once rightly concluded that the animal had escaped from the place where our main party had put up for the night. It was a delightfully cool and fresh morning, with the luxuriant grass and reeds along the clear spring-fed stream still moist with the rain of the night. The sky above had cleared, but a light veil of mist and vapour clung to the bare hills north and south. It was long since I had felt so completely carried back to the soft colours and outlines of rural England.

I was almost sorry that the groups of fine shady elms scattered among fields only some two miles off to the south proved to mark 'South Ch'iao-tzŭ,' the goal we had vainly searched for the previous night. Great was my surprise when the screen of tall elms and willows unmasked a small walled town, the true centre of the oasis. Through a big half-ruined gate we reached the enclosed area, about a quarter of a mile square, but of irregular shape. Passing the high clay walls of an inner fort and the silent ruins of dismantled dwellings, we soon came upon a village of some thirty or forty houses hidden among the remains of a place once far more populous. Leisurely householders and numbers of lively boys were already about in spite of the early hour, and quickly we were guided to where a